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Collective As Form, Playground As Medium

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The system of art realises society in its own realm as an exemplary case. ... [We] see in it the paradigm of modern society. But this situation only raises the question: What difference does it make?

Niklas Luhmann¹

When the present existence has ceased to make sense, it can still come to sense again through the realisation of its form.

George Spencer Brown²

The general claim of this paper is that playgrounds offer a medium for forms of collectivity. Of course, this begs a number of questions.

There is a longstanding association of playground with the organisation of collectivity. Johan Huizinga famously wrote of a playground as a ‘magic circle’ within which an ‘absolute and supreme’ order obtains.³ The various intensities, dependencies of this order hold players ‘‘apart together’ in an exceptional situation.’⁴ But to my mind there is a more appropriate description of playgrounds to be found in Herman Melville’s statement in *Moby Dick* that there are some enterprises ‘in which a careful disorderliness is the true method.’⁵ If play is indeed such an enterprise, then we might well ask how its disorderliness is ‘cared for.’

This latter is a problem of *organisational complexity*, by which I mean that playgrounds present the problem of a number of interrelated elements whose behaviour is organised but neither simple, and so not fully predictable, nor random, and so not resolvable by statistical aggregation; hence, the familiar disorderliness of playgrounds—organised and complex.⁶

How do playgrounds make this organised complexity possible? To answer this question we might make use of the conceptual resources of systems theory, if the basic question asked by systems theory is, as Eva Knodt claims, ‘how is organised complexity possible?’⁷ The particular resource that I want to make use of here, as indicated by the general claim of this paper, is the form/medium distinction developed by Niklas Luhmann.

Before attending to this distinction in more detail there are further points to be noted, related to the above, which concern some peculiarities of the modelling of collectivity in play.

Firstly, with the withdrawal into play there is a *loosening* of otherwise binding and determinate collective forms, however provisional or more or less consequential this might be. In this regard, Maurice Blanchot once wrote of the ‘non-personal intimacy’ of players (gamblers, in fact), such that in play the particularities (personal, biographical, economic, etc.) of players comes to be forgotten, or at least not taken into account. We might say, then, that play introduces players to one another anonymously.⁸

Anonymity and intimacy: that both hold between players disputes the now common claim that play expresses or realises—or to use more current jargon, *optimises*—prior subjectivities. The collectivities modelled in play are based upon a relation between players that is proximate and distant at the same time, as well as being independent of or forgetful of other collectivities that hold at other levels.

Secondly, following this, play understood as form is uncoupled from a certain realist assumption that makes play supplementary and secondary to a non-play reality already given. Play therefore ceases to be representational and becomes instead operational and constructive; no longer a fragile world of illusion, to be protected from the demands of the real by its advocates or to be dismissed as unnecessary by its detractors.

¹ Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, translated by E. M. Knot, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 309-310.

² George Spencer Brown, *Laws of Form*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), xxi.

³ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: a study of the play element in culture*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, (New York: Everyman’s Library, 1907), 382.

⁶ See Warren Weaver, ‘Science and Complexity,’ *American Scientist* 36 (1948): 539, 536-544.

⁷ Eva M. Knodt, ‘Foreword’ in Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, translated by E. M. Knodt, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), xvii.

⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, translated by S. Hanson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 217. Incidentally, this possibility of ‘non-personal intimacy’ suggests that, contra Badiou’s thesis concerning the current domination of ‘romantic formalism,’ there might be more to such forms of collective play than either ‘ludic me-ism’ or ‘communitarian expressivity.’ See Alain Badiou, ‘Manifesto of Affirmationism,’ translated by B. P. Fulks, *Lacanian Ink* 24 (2005), <<http://www.lacan.com/frameXXIV5.htm>> (23rd October 2009)

In addition to this, modelling collectivity takes on a greater significance now that playgrounds have become nexus for a problem particular to neo-liberal governmentality; that is, what Foucault described as the governance of free subjects.⁹ The dominance of this governmentality in various guises has led to the naturalisation of certain models both of play—as the pedagogy of risk management, for instance—and of player—as the entrepreneurial or at least economic subject.

Finally, when one considers the dispersal of playgrounds throughout contemporary post-industrial societies, the fact that to a perhaps unprecedented degree play in general no longer has its proper time and place, then our most pressing problem becomes, at the very least, by what means the modelling of collectivities in play might be observed.

It might be that some contemporary art works, which I will cautiously describe as ‘participatory’, provide just such a means. Not because with such works we play more or play better, but because when playgrounds provide the medium for participatory art works, the forms of collectivity that gather there can be observed, to quote Luhmann, ‘in the mode of the made, i.e. the mode in which [they] could be made other.’¹⁰ Observed thus, forms of play introduce an excess of compositional possibility in the world. This is done by orchestrating second-order observations of collectivities in play raises the question of ‘Other – but how?’

We might ask what can be done with this excess of compositional possibility and these various dramatisations of a question, which is also something of a promise. Needless to say, perhaps, to make the test of such excesses whether or not they provide solutions to particular problems would be to condemn ourselves to a melancholic reflection upon art’s unfulfilled (political) promises.¹¹ There is unlikely to be any affordance here for a ‘practical apprenticeship for the real political and social freedom to come,’ as Jameson describes Schiller’s programme of aesthetic education, to which, of course, play is central.¹² Rather, the direction of the question suggests the initiation of further searches, and the production of more or less fitting, more or less complex dramatisations of the question itself – ‘Other—but how?’

Certainly, this question functions as a primary operations in the dynamic reproduction of the social system of art, affecting a *dance* of system-environment distinction by which a system risks itself and raises the question of its own functioning.¹³ Furthermore, ‘Other – but how?’ presents a highly productive paradox. In dramatising this question, the work of art generates indeterminacies (as the occasion for further searches), but then must show them both to be determined by the work itself and to fit the expectations of observers (even if the only expectation is that a form provokes communication as to whether or not it is fitting). In this way, the work overcomes its own contingency and the improbability of its forms by re-entering the system-environment distinction in each of the system’s operations,¹⁴ but then also, precisely by constructing itself on the basis of re-entry, preserves an ‘unresolvable [sic] indeterminacy’ at its core.¹⁵

What, then, does it mean to conceive of a playground as a medium? For Luhmann, a medium cannot be understood except in its distinction to form, and neither form nor medium are given prior to their functioning as substrates by which a system constructs itself.¹⁶ Here, of course, we are only concerned with the social system of art.

⁹ Playgrounds provide a nexus for this problem because, on the one hand, governance is obliged to limit itself and to allow for independence and self-organisation on the part of players, yet, on the other hand, repeated governmental intervention is required to secure against disorganisation and to reproduce the freedoms that neo-liberalism demands and consumes (e.g. the unimpeded realisation of individual desires, fulfilment of individual potential, etc.). See Michel Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power,’ in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982) and Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique: Cours au Collège de France, 1978-1979*, edited by F. Gros, (Paris: Seuil/Gallimard, 2004), also Michel Senellart, ‘La Question du Libéralisme,’ *Magazine Littéraire* 435 (2004).

¹⁰ Niklas Luhmann, ‘The Medium of Art,’ *Thesis Eleven* 18/19 (1987): 111, 101-113.

¹¹ Jacques Rancière, ‘The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes: emplotments of autonomy and heteronomy,’ *New Left Review* 14 (March-April, 2002): 151, 133-151.

¹² Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-century dialectical theories of literature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 90.

¹³ Dirk Baecker, ‘Why Systems?’ *Theory, Culture & Society* 18 (2001): 63, 59-74

¹⁴ Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, 120.

¹⁵ George Spencer Brown, *Laws of Form*, 57. See also, Michael Schiltz, ‘Space is the Place: *The Laws of Form* and social systems’, *Thesis Eleven* 88 (2007): 8-30.

¹⁶ Niklas Luhmann, ‘Cognition as Construction,’ in Hans-Georg Moeller, *Luhmann Explained: from souls to systems*, (Peru, Ill.: Open Court, 2006), 253. *Nota bene*. Medium is to be understood operationally—it has no ontological primacy over form, as though it were some base matter into which form makes its cuts.

Substrates consist of elements that either ‘loosely coupled’, in the case of medium, or ‘tightly coupled’, in the case of form. Loosely-coupled, a medium presents a ‘reservoir’ of selection, a space of meaningful compositional possibilities’ for the elaboration of forms.¹⁷ Tightly-coupled, forms are selected from a medium, leading to a ‘concentration of relations of dependence’ between elements.¹⁸

Medium can be perceived only as form, otherwise it is too diffuse. For example, it is only because the air, as medium, is not itself condensed or tightly-coupled that noises, as forms, can be transmitted through it. Or: ‘We only hear the clock ticking because the air does not tick.’¹⁹ Nevertheless, the potential of a medium always exceeds the forms actualised from it, because forms are necessarily selective and therefore reductive: there is always something unmarked by a selection, always a part of the form that will elude observation.

This means that, if we take complexity to consist of the uncertainty of an observer, then there is an ineradicable complexity to the selection and observation of forms.²⁰ Consequently, each form of play holds in the face of uncertainty as to what is not selected, what is not marked and remains potential in the medium of the playground.²¹

A crucial problem for the forms of collectivity gathered in play is how to handle complexity; how to orchestrate it and how to constrain it. If the work of art must itself, paradoxically, generate indeterminacy, then again we might ask, bearing in mind the caveats above concerning implementation and problem-solving, to what extent might we find here models for how to handle complexity or to ‘care for’ disorderliness? Perhaps the mere asking of this question is enough. If nothing else, such works compel us to discover evidence of order, of collective organisation and possibility in what are otherwise considered the most improbable forms.

The following two works stand as exemplars of the above. The first is Gabriel Orozco’s *Oval Billiard Table* (1996). By eliminating pockets from the table and suspending the red ball from the ceiling so that it hangs just above the surface of the cloth, Orozco has loosened the conventional form of billiards so that the game is now available as a medium for the imprint of further forms. As medium, elements of the game present more possibilities than otherwise would be available to players of conventional billiards, both as to what can be played and to the ways in which players might be bound together in play. To ‘simply’ play billiards would be to make the game operative and binding through a preference for one side of the form, the side marked as play, the other side of which, non-play, would remain unobserved or latent.

With *Oval Billiard Table*, this latency becomes the potential of a medium. More precisely, the medium-form distinction is not given to players but is used itself *in a medial fashion*. One can argue that it is by virtue of the *mediality* of this distinction that participation is solicited in the work, changing according to the particular form this distinction takes from one moment of play to another. And as each form of play models collectivity in a particular way, collectivity too is used here in a medial fashion.

In the absence of any instruction from Orozco, an observer/participant (these are not necessarily discrete positions) of this potential playground is faced with the uncertainty of a medium from which a selection nonetheless must be made. With *Oval Billiard Table*, collectivity is modelled *for* something, but its particular *telos* remains undisclosed, or at least under-determined.

With Tino Sehgal’s *This Success/This Failure* (2007), the conditions of the playground are quite different. The ICA in London is given over as a playground for children from nearby inner-city schools. Neither props nor toys are provided. Instead there are two instructions: 1. that the children make their own play and 2. that when an attendee of the gallery enters and encounters them playing at least one of the children must approach that attendee, state her name and declare whether or not her play and the play of her co-performers is to be considered a success or a failure.

Criteria for success and failure are given by the children, but just what these criteria might be is less interesting here than what happens to the form of play following this instruction to make and observe such a distinction (success/failure). There are at least three ways in which this can be understood.

1. By observing and evaluating their play thus, the children assist in the artwork’s necessary demonstration of its fittingness to the anticipations of a more or less informed audience, despite its improbable form.

¹⁷ Niklas Luhmann, ‘The Medium of Art,’ 104.

¹⁸ Ibid., 102.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ On the correlation of complexity with the uncertainty of the observer, see William Rasch, *Niklas Luhmann’s Modernity: the paradoxes of differentiation*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000): 47.

²¹ Cf. W. Ross Ashby, ‘Principles of the self-organizing system,’ in *Principles of Self-Organization: Transactions of the University of Illinois Symposium*, edited by H. Von Foerster and G. W. Zopf, Jr., (London: Pergamon Press, 1962): 258, 255-278: ‘The real world gives the subset of what *is*; the product-space [read: medium] represents the uncertainty of the *observer*.’

2. By demanding self-observation, *This Success/This Failure* introduces a minimal technique of self to the children's play (problematically assuming that the children do not already do this). As such, *This Success/This Failure* enacts a further development of the exhibitionary complex of art and culture by which a 'self-regulating citizenry' has been produced.²²
3. But there is also an address to attendee of the gallery, thus achieving a minimal level of self-organisation between the two insofar as each is made conditional upon the other by way of a third (the children's play).²³ An attendee is now in a position to begin or to refuse, compelled to select in the absence of a fantasy of observation that is not also participation. As an attendee, one cannot be uninvolved in the situation of the work—to observe is to *also* play.²⁴

Following this latter point, the children's play is not some spontaneous behaviour from which (adult) observers are exempted, and an account of collectivities in play will have to be generous and sophisticated enough to understand this 'also', which is both separate within and inseparable from a form of collectivity in play, as it is upon this 'also' that the possibility of self-organisation turns.

What is more, the topology of the playground is extended (beyond the 'player-actor'), so that the playground now *imagines* a further operation and a further observation. The question of 'Other—but how?' is restaged at another level, that of the attendee, who is drawn into the topological neighbourhood of play.

In many ways, the position of the attendee models our own; that of an observer compelled to discover evidence of an organised disorderliness in what are otherwise the most improbable forms and compelled to restage the question of 'Other – but how?' Just how to observe and care for this disorderliness in play remains unclear; but, as noted, it is a current governmental problem, and if it is not to be given over fully to managerial solutions, then we should also make it ours.

²² Tony Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary Complex,' *New Formations* 4 (spring 1988): 73-102.

²³ Ross Ashby, 'Principles of the self-organizing system,' (1962), *E:CO* 6, (2004): 256, 102-126

²⁴ Sehgal in Tom Griffin, 'Tino Sehgal : An Interview,' *Artforum*, XLIII 9 (May 2005).